


Audrey Glace

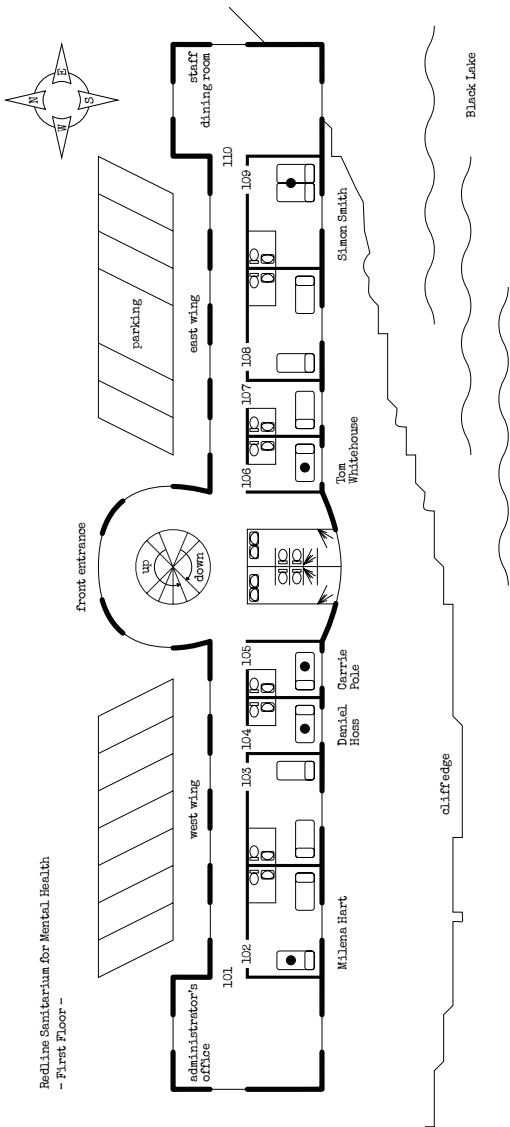


The
Redline
Mystery

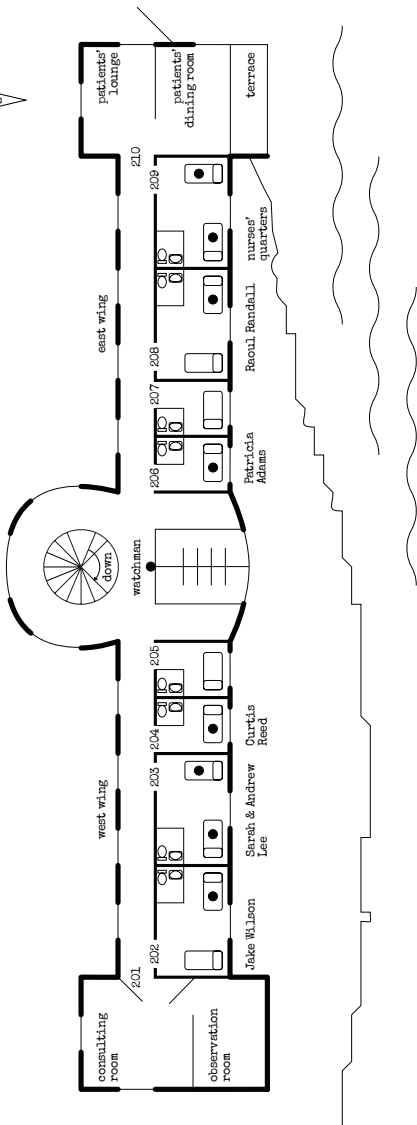
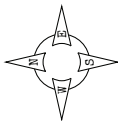
SAMPLE

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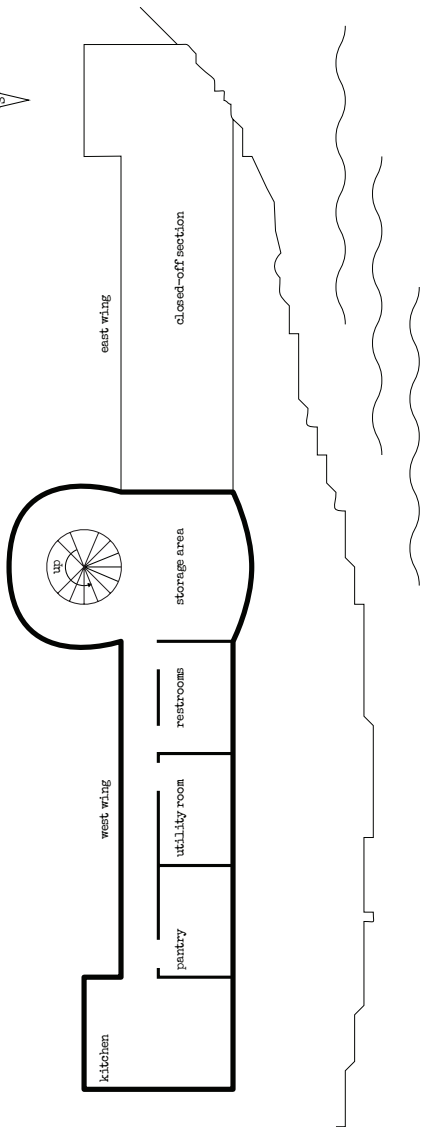
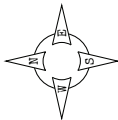
Redline Sanitarium for Mental Health
- First Floor -



Redline Sanitarium for Mental Health
 - Second Floor -



Redline Sanitarium for Mental Health
- Basement -





THE REDLINE

“COME ON IN, OFFICER HART,” the intercom crackled.

The metal gates swung open with a groan, shaking rust off a large sign hanging above. Milena craned her neck to read it.

REDLINE SANITARIUM

Mens securo in corpore tuto

She tapped the steering wheel and turned to the patient buckled up in the dead man’s seat. “That’s Latin, isn’t it? Secure mind in...what?”

Jake did not stop chewing on his upper lip. His hospital bracelet said he was 21, but that pout shaved about five years off his sullen face. Milena reached over to shift his left handcuff. It had made a dent in his bandages. As thanks, he let out a mighty puff that sent his blonde bangs flying.

“Almost there,” she announced. “You’ll be just in time for dinner. Then you’ll get to sulk to your heart’s content while *they* keep your sorry ass safe.”

He turned his face away from her in a kingly gesture of dismissal. From his matted hair, another sweatdrop slid down to enlarge the stain on his t-shirt. Milena couldn't help but sympathize with him about that. Her own shirt had glued her torso to her seat a couple of hours ago. It was close to sunset and almost halfway into September, but this was Texas, so it was 85 degrees outside and, as usual, fifteen more inside the lemon the department had dumped on her.

She wiped her hands on her damp sides, shoved the stick directly into second gear, and stepped on the gas. The transmission could take worse. Despite all her attempts to scrap it, the tough old car insisted on running. She released the clutch abruptly into a forward jolt. Just then, the Redline gates began closing around them.

"Excuse me, are you cra—trying to kill us?! Hold on, will you?" she shouted.

The intercom replied with static, while the gates continued their implacable approach. She dropped a curse before she climbed on the gas pedal. The brat didn't even stir. They stormed in with only seconds to spare.

Still muttering, she checked over her shoulder that they were in the clear. The massive gates had merged with the high walls behind them, securing them inside the sanitarium grounds. The sign hadn't been kidding. The walls—literal ramparts—were topped by spikes for good measure, perhaps to compensate for the lack of a moat. Her spirits lifted. They had made it to the homestretch. The Redline Sanitarium waited ahead, perched on top of the hill like a badly glued souvenir.

The only way up through shrub land was a twisted asphalt trail gilded by the orange sun. It threw them around like a rollercoaster track, showing off a family of cacti here and a foraging possum there, amid the sparkles

of a lake hidden behind the hill. Milena fiddled with the useless sun visor until she almost ran the car into the red dust on the side of the road. That didn't faze Jake either. Not a moment too soon, a sharp turn relieved her eyes from glare, allowing her a first clear glimpse of the Redline.

The sanitarium was a clean rectangular white-on-gray affair whose front entrance was set in a central apse protruding from its façade. That was the extent of Milena's architectural knowledge, but, damn, it was one classy building. She hadn't expected European design in the heart of small-town America. On the Redline's left flank, the ground had given way in a dramatic landslide that exposed some of the foundation. The skeleton of the building matched the rest, as if it had been meant to be seen.

It was already seven when Milena backed the car into a parking spot to the right of the entrance. Leaving the air vents running for Jake, she stumbled out into the hot evening. She pinched her pants away from her skin and made a half-hearted attempt to smooth the wrinkles in her uniform jacket, but it was beyond saving. She stretched and yawned, almost swallowing a leaf stirred by a fleeting gust of wind. The air tasted of the unseen lake. Her beloved digital camera, which had cost her a month's salary, was going to get a good workout here.

The parking lot was peppered with ornamental trees toughing it out in the arid climate. Likewise, the sanitarium and its grounds looked accidental in the big sky prairie she had just crossed. She had parked in the elite wing; her car stuck out like a sore thumb among the three expensive models. The four shabbier vehicles huddled together on the other side of the entrance, closer to the landslide. The vanity plate of the shiny car next to hers brokenly proclaimed, "BELIVE." Its two neighbors

had local plates with the Redline motto inscribed at the bottom. She still didn't know what the hell the Latin stood for.

She rang the intercom twice, with no apparent reaction from inside. Whoever had opened the gates had moved on with his life rather fast. Standing on her toes, she pressed her forehead to one of the square panes of a dusty window, but there was nothing to see inside except two numbered doors.

She walked a few steps back the way they had driven, to shoot a panorama of the downhill view. A dry tree reached out from the nearest bushes towards the vast reddish-brown space overlooked by the Redline. It was a clear evening. The only signs of life were some tiny grazing cows and a coyote, the prairie wolf, howling in the distance. From the top, she was able to appreciate the sheer size of the sanitarium grounds—its ramparts, quite a ways off the foot of the hill, looked the size of thistles.

When she had taken enough photos, she began to worry about the Redline still ignoring her. She was by now sorely wishing she hadn't skipped the last restroom stop. She kicked a pebble down the trail and watched it get lost in the shrubbery. Unsatisfied, she returned to the car to see Jake staring down at his hands.

She sat back behind the wheel and snapped her fingers. "Hey! Check out that view. You don't know when you'll get to see it again." She picked up the bulky receiver.

He sniffled and wiped his nose on his shoulder.

Just as Milena was fumbling in the fourth pocket of her jacket for the Redline office number, the door of the building opened and three men came out. Two of them—security staff, by their looks—strode towards the front of the car, and the third ambled after them, hands in his pockets. She rolled down the windows.

“Good evening, ma’am,” one of the security guards said. “Officer Milena Hart?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve got Jake Wilson here to transfer into your custody.” She handed the paperwork out Jake’s window.

The man gave it no more than a cursory glance before cramming it in his pocket. “Appreciated.” He gestured to his colleague, who opened the passenger door.

Jake clutched her sleeve. “Don’t leave me here,” he pleaded in a thin, ragged voice. “Don’t leave me with them.” It was the first time he had looked her way since the start of their trip. His eyes were bloodshot from silent crying.

With a pang of guilt, she pushed his hand away, helping the guard unbuckle the seatbelt. “You’ll be fine. They’re paid to take care of you. Better here than dead, right?”

As the guards took him out of the car, Jake shot her a look of unadulterated hatred. The slam of the car door felt like a cold hard slap to her face. She crossed her arms tightly, eyes on the passenger side mirror. The two guards grabbed Jake, still handcuffed, roughly from either side and half-dragged him inside the building. He did not look back.

“Do not be upset, officer,” the third man said. She gave a start—he had approached from the left. He rested his bony elbow on her window ledge. “You are doing the right thing. All our patients are here for their own good. Have you been waiting long?”

“Only 20 minutes.” Milena looked the man over. He was in his thirties, ginger-colored, with an angular body ending in a long face lengthened even more by his premature balding. His sparse beard and mustache framed a thin mouth. The center of gravity of his face was a pair of small coal-black eyes that gave him a ragdoll vibe.

“Dr. Tom Whitehouse. I will be working with Jacob.

Sorry for your wait, we had a commotion earlier that threw everyone off schedule.” He wiped his right hand on his coat several times, then held it out.

“Well, you’re here now.” Milena shook the proffered hand firmly. “Good luck with him, doctor. He’s going to be a tough nut to crack.” She looked down at the handshake and noticed a red sliver on the man’s wrist. “Uh...are you bleeding?”

“Nothing to worry about.” He pulled away quickly, rubbed his palm on his coat again, and jammed both hands into his pockets. He stepped aside, letting her get out of the car. He was quite a bit taller than her—not something she encountered often. “Would you like to stretch your legs, officer? If we walk around the building we will be in sight of the lake in no time.” Seeing her wavering, he added, “I would like to discuss Jacob’s case so I am better prepared to meet him tomorrow.”

“All right,” she sighed, mounting her backpack on her shoulders. As Whitehouse led their way through the parking lot, she gave one last look to the surrounding vehicles. “Which one’s yours?”

He pointed to the shiniest car. Its misspelled license plate gave her pause again. “Be ‘live’? As opposed to being dead? Or pre-recorded?”

“‘Believe.’ Six character limit.”

“Religious, gotcha.”

He huffed. “It is completely unrelated to that crock.”

She looked at the next license plate. “What does that mean, *Mens securo in corpore tuto*?”

“That is not pronounced—” He checked himself. “It means ‘Safe mind in a safe body.’ To be literal, it is *reliable* mind in a *protected* body, but that does not quite roll off the tongue.”

As they neared the end of the building, Milena’s eyes

were dazzled by a large window. Behind the blinds, she made out the curly white hair and heavysset shoulders of a man hunched over a desk.

“The administrator’s office. He said you would be staying the night with us—will you?”

She yawned heartily at the fading sky and rubbed her palm over her lips. “I wish I could drive right back to my own pillow, but it *is* late and I’ve babysat a suicidal guy for hours. Thanks for putting me up.”

“No trouble at all. The staff floor has plenty of empty beds.”

The remark hung a little ominously in the air for a second. The other two windows of the office blazed at them in turn as they rounded the corner. And then there was the lake. Milena stopped in her tracks, camera drawn.

“The Black Lake. Splendid, is it not?” preened Whitehouse, as if he had produced it himself.

She did not answer, already on her way towards the jagged cliff edge, snapping blurry pictures as she went. The Black Lake’s waters stretched as far as she could see. Where they met the red sun they melted it—dusk would be upon them in less than half an hour. The kid had struck lucky. There were worse places out there than this sanitarium. Even from this height, she could hear the water lapping against the cliff. She looked over the edge at the dark mass and faltered—it was an almost sheer drop down to the surface.

“Stay away from the water!” shouted Whitehouse from behind her.

Milena wet her dry lips and turned around unsteadily. She started back towards the sanitarium. Another apse, glass-frosted and slightly less rounded than the one in front, was the centerpiece of this side of the building. It looked as if the architect had first modeled both protrusions to be

equal, then punched this one in, and it had flattened while the front entrance had ballooned out.

Scattered room lights blinked at her through the blinds. She longingly imagined the restrooms that had to be somewhere in there. There were ten windows on the first floor, eight plus a terrace on the second. All the upper floor windows were caged in cast-iron bars.

“Back home it would be the other way around,” she said, half to herself.

“I beg your pardon?” A cigarette sparked to life in Whitehouse’s fist.

The building swayed a little. Milena blinked to settle it. Driving had really taken it out of her. “The first floor was grated, not the second one. To keep burglars out.” Back home, the “first floor” had also been the “ground floor.” It had taken her years to unlearn these references.

She shrugged her backpack off as she sank down on a tree stump. It wasn’t the most comfortable spot. It felt rough and clammy even through her uniform pants. Closer to the ground, the smell of soil and decomposing leaves conjured memories of her grandmother’s backyard.

Why is it so cold, babusya?

She jerked up, fell back, and winced. She was too damned tired to stand.

Whitehouse blew a small cloud of nasty smoke. “Were you on the scene of Jacob’s attempted suicide?”

“Yes, I discovered him.”

She closed her eyes, not really wanting to remember. When she reopened them, she noticed some white markings on a dark window on the second floor. It looked like someone had used the window panes as an impromptu tic-tac-toe board. The x player had won with three chalk crosses in the middle row. The o player had let him win; the two circles had been placed at the top.

“Officer?”

Milena started at the sound of Whitehouse’s voice. “I responded to the 911 call almost three weeks ago, on a Friday afternoon. The repairman was there to fix a leaking AC unit. He called emergency when he saw blood pooled outside the door. I was patrolling the neighborhood, so I got there before the ambulance and the fire truck.”

She didn’t have to tell him for how many minutes she’d waffled after she’d heard the call. The wind pushed her hair into her face and she flicked it off. If only she could have flicked off the memories.

“What happened next?” prompted Whitehouse.

“He helped me break the lock. The door resisted, so we forced it until I could squeeze in. I had to step in the blood...” She inhaled slowly to calm herself. “When I was through, the door snapped shut and Jake fell over—backwards onto my feet.” She let out the rest of the breath. “He’d been sitting on the floor with his back against the door. His left wrist was a mess. Everything was messy, blood was everywhere—warm blood. He was conscious, but just barely.” She turned back towards the lake. The waves swam across her vision. “I—gave him first aid until the ambulance arrived—tied his arm and applied—applied pressure to it.”

Whitehouse cleared his voice gingerly behind her. “You seem very empathic towards Jacob.”

“Yeah.”

“If you do not mind me asking, how long have you been on the force?”

“Almost seven years,” she wheezed.

“It is hard to believe this is the roughest emergency you have witnessed.” His voice vibrated low in her skull. “And yet...”

She opened her mouth to reply then closed it again.

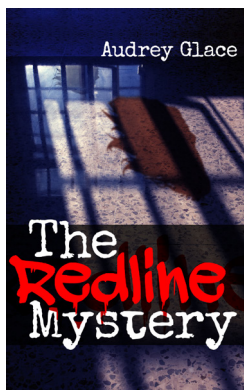
Someone—*something* was on the second floor. A dark presence in a dark room. Its glinting eyes watched her through the blinds.

She pulled at her collar to ease the pressure. The thing stood at the window to the right of the one with the tic-tac-toe board. How long had it been watching? She stared up blankly into its indistinct face until the blinds snapped shut.

Whitehouse's voice was muffled. "Are you all right? Do you need some water? We should head back."

She heard herself laugh hysterically. *Plenty of red water right here.*

"We should head back," he echoed. "I will show you to your room." He crushed his unfinished cigarette into the ground as he picked up her bag.



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